

# Negotiating Gender through Fun and Play: Radical Femininity and Fantasy in the Red Hat Society

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**Samira van Bohemen<sup>1</sup>, Liesbet van Zoonen<sup>1,2</sup>,  
and Stef Aupers<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The Red Hat Society (RHS) is a relatively new and international women's network that offers "fun" and "friendship" specifically for women over fifty. Its members, the Red Hatters, are easily recognized in the streets by their red hats and otherwise purple attire, giving the RHS its unique flavor of leisure combined with expressive public performance. In this article, we use interviews and observations to study how the fun experiences aimed at by the RHS are articulated with negotiations of gender and age. Our analysis directed us toward a contradictory and multilayered expression of feminism and femininity entrenched in RHS performance. While some of the Red Hatters explicitly identified with feminism using RHS performance as a means to "undo" gender, others identified more with traditional femininity, using it to "do" gender instead. We introduce the concept of "radical femininity" to show how the Red Hatters continuously negotiate the volatile space between these two broad societal discourses that position women in contradictory ways. Furthermore, we show how Red Hatters draw upon fantasy as embodied in play to negotiate this space.

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<sup>1</sup>Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>University of Loughborough, Loughborough, United Kingdom

## **Corresponding Author:**

Samira van Bohemen, Department of Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, POBOX 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: [vanbohemens@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:vanbohemens@fsw.eur.nl)

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## Introduction

In an episode of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (November 2005), housewife and mother Marge joins the “Cheery Red Tomatoes,” a group of fifty-something women who wear pink hats and red dresses. They take Marge skydiving and convince her to join them in a million-dollar heist—Marge participates even though Homer tries to persuade her not to. The episode is called “The Last of the Red Hat Mamas” and is inspired by the “Red Hat Society” (RHS), an informal international network of women’s groups that offer “fun” and “friendship” for women over fifty. Its appearance in the series as well as in other popular sitcoms, such as *Still Standing* (2004) and *Rules of Engagement* (2011), shows how big the RHS has become. Originally set up in 1998 in Fullerton, California, the RHS in 2012 has over forty thousand chapters in all fifty U.S. states, and in other countries, like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Unlike Marge and her friends, the Red Hatters are known for wearing red rather than pink hats, which they combine with purple, not red, clothes.

According to the RHS’ “official” history, it all started innocently when Sue Ellen Cooper stumbled over a vintage red fedora and bought it simply because it was cheap. She quickly discovered that red hats were nice, upbeat birthday gifts for her friends who turned fifty or older. Going out for tea together, Sue Ellen and her friends decided to wear their red hats and when they did it again and again a new women’s “society” was born (Cooper 2004). In the RHS, members give each other fantasy names, such as lady, duchess, or queen. The latter is automatically bestowed on every woman who starts her own RHS chapter. Unlike real-life queens, however, RHS queens do not have any responsibility other than making sure she and her chapter have a good time. She and her “court” organize all sorts of “fun” and “frivolous” activities, during which all participants are required to wear a red hat and purple clothes, except for members who are not yet fifty (the Pink Hatters); they are supposed to wear pink hats with lavender clothes.

Given its size, there has been surprisingly little research about the RHS. The few studies that have appeared cover a broad range of subjects: dress-up (Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 2011), camp (Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008), conspicuous consumption (Stalp et al. 2009), older women’s play (Yarnal 2006; Yarnal, Chick, and Kerstetter 2008), and psychosocial health and well-being (Barrett, Pai, and Redmond 2012; Hutchinson et al. 2008; Kerstetter et al.

2008; Radina et al. 2008; Son et al. 2007; Son, Yarnal, and Kerstetter 2010). Within this body of literature, we can roughly differentiate between three approaches to the RHS. The first one engages with the RHS as a resource for coping with stress and other challenges women are likely to face in later life. Such studies show how the RHS provides social support and positive emotions, enabling members to reassess life priorities and circumstances (Barrett, Pai, and Redmond 2012; Hutchinson et al. 2008; Kerstetter et al. 2008; Son et al. 2007; Son, Yarnal, and Kerstetter 2010).

A specific challenge midlife and older women face is negative stereotyping (Radina et al. 2008). This is connected with the second approach to the RHS, which advances the idea that Red Hatters negotiate hegemonic gender and age discourse through conspicuous consumption and a public exhibition of fun and camp (Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008; Stalp et al. 2009). A third approach overarches the previous two and studies the RHS in connection with play theory (Yarnal 2006; Yarnal, Chick, and Kerstetter 2008). Yarnal (2006) in particular explores how the RHS offers a *liminal* space for play that fosters *communitas* through friendship, support, and an overall sense of unity and belonging, while it also creates freedom to experiment with dominant notions of femininity and age.

These studies contain an interesting paradox with respect to the way in which the RHS and its members position themselves toward dominant gender discourse. As some authors discuss, the RHS's use of spectacular femininity on the one hand challenges hegemonic gender discourse but on the other hand also reproduces it (Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008; Stalp et al. 2009; Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 2011). Their studies hence suggest that Red Hatters "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) as much as they "undo gender" (Deutsch 2007).

Our study aims to contribute to this body of literature by locating this paradox in the self-understanding of Red Hatters and their articulations of fun. Do they experience fun from challenging hegemonic femininity, or rather from celebrating it, or both? To expand the notion of the RHS as a liminal space, we focus particularly on the meaning of "play" for the Red Hatters, and the question if and how their play reaches out to their everyday lives. Our data come from our ethnographic study about the Red Hat Society in the Netherlands (see also van Bohemen, van Zoonen, and Aupers 2013), and thus we also provide an international perspective to the uniquely U.S.-based literature.

We present our outcomes in a narrative way, in the same inductive spirit as the ethnography it is based on. This means that we gradually build a theory based on the empirical analysis—connecting it back and forth to the literature as we go.

## Data and Method

We conducted a multimethod ethnographic study about the RHS in the Netherlands in 2011 and 2012. In the Netherlands the RHS has become widely popular since its introduction in 2005 and it now counts over a hundred chapters, giving it the highest density of RHS chapters in the world. The fieldwork for this study has been done by the first author. She conducted interviews with fifteen Red Hatters who are members of chapters located throughout the country. Participants were initially selected on the basis of their residence in urban and rural environments in different parts of the Netherlands, to ensure diversity. They were initially approached via email. Our request immediately met with much enthusiasm from Red Hatters and, once word came out, the first author was on several occasions approached by Red Hatters who volunteered to participate. The resulting interviews were semistructured and lasted between one and a half and four hours. They dealt with the pleasures and other meaningful experiences Red Hatters derive from their involvement in the RHS.

Subsequently, the first author also participated in several different Red Hat events, such as the Queens lunch, the Dutch national convention, two meetings of regional chapters, and a seven-day cruise with nearly two hundred Red Hatters.<sup>1</sup> To observe these events, she again sometimes approached organizers, but most of the time was spontaneously invited. For instance, she was invited to join a cruise to Norway by a Queen who organized reduced rates for Red Hatters. During this and all other events, the author observed the conduct and interactions between the Red Hatters but also frequently joined in conversations. She made notes directly after and further transcribed the observations from memory in the following days.

We approached these data about Red Hatters' experiences, feelings and acts, as constituting situated forms of identity performance, as means of "doing" and "undoing" gender. This meant that we analyzed *what* Red Hatters said and did, as well as *how* they said and did it, paying particular attention to the pragmatics of their talk and acts, that is, what was achieved by them in terms of gender and age performance (cf. van Zoonen 1994). The coding process consisted of three phases. In the first phase, we established coding categories through a bottom-up and comparative method (Boyatzis 1998; see also Glaser and Strauss 1967), where we read through the interview and observation transcriptions several times, paying particular attention to recurring similarities and differences. In this phase, the authors met as a research team to establish the main themes, which were coded into a data matrix. In the second phase, we connected these themes to established literature about the RHS, and about femininity and age more broadly. We reread the data with

new theoretical insights in mind, employing a top-down approach to establish new themes and reach saturation of discourse. In the third phase, themes were further developed and elucidated by relevant quotes, which were placed together in theme files.

In what follows, we first present how the fun factor is understood and performed by the Dutch Red Hatters, and show how it is linked to the “ethic of care” that pervades their self-understanding. Then we focus on how the visual and spectacular elements of RHS performance enable a simultaneous resistance and confirmation of dominant discourses of gender and age. We conclude by relating our findings to studies about the role of fantasy and role-play in women’s leisure, and show how both offer the Red Hatters a liminal space to experiment with diverse gender identities, roles and positions.

### The “Fun” Factor

The self-proclaimed purposes of the RHS are fun, friendship, freedom, fulfilment, and fitness (<http://www.redhatsociety.com/press/OurMission.html>). The U.S. mother organization calls itself a *dis*-organization, because strict organizational structures are considered to be unhelpful and boring (Cooper 2004). The Dutch Red Hatter message promotes “fun and friendship after fifty,” and explicitly states: “no objectives, no politics, no religion or whatever else” (<http://www.redhatnederland.nl/introductie.html>).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the first question to answer is how the Dutch Red Hatters construct and experience “fun.” Two broad narratives emerged from our analysis.

The first narrative that our respondents tell in different ways, is that they like to do something, have fun, *for themselves* and not for others. Indeed, the Red Hatters we interviewed all said at some point that what they enjoy most is that there are no rules, no obligations, no do-gooding and/or no nagging. Some women also liked that men nor husbands are present. The RHS is perceived and presented as being completely about the women themselves and their own experience of fun:

- Sanna: And we are often asked “do you also support a cause?” And then we say “yes, ourselves. We are our own cause.” And then they look a little like, “huh, is that possible?,” because shouldn’t you have some kind of cause? Well in principle we don’t have that, just ourselves, a little fun for ourselves, that’s all there is to it.
- Janna: The nice thing is, you don’t have any obligations. It’s just cosy,<sup>3</sup> it’s gay, we are not going to nag, and you don’t get the chance to go on for hours about all your illnesses or other stuff. We have known each other for quite some years, of course, so you do ask

how things are, but you cannot go on for half a night. It's just, we have an uncomplicated evening, and if you want to talk, you can talk about easy things; everyone has their problems and you can leave them at home that night.

Stories about personal fun such as these connect with the leisure objective of the RHS (e.g., Mannell and Kleiber 1997; Shaw 1994; Shaw and Dawson 2001). However, what makes the RHS unique is that it ties leisure to visual spectacle. The Red Hatters are conspicuously dressed and engage in leisure out and about in public space. This is itself a source of fun for the Red Hatters, who thoroughly enjoy the dressing up and the attention they get as a result. This second narrative of RHS fun is embodied by Froukje, who met us for the interview dressed in full Red Hat regalia, complete with red lace gloves.

Froukje: Even if you're out with just the two, even if you are out on your own, then I already have a lot of looks coming my way. But I just love that. Because in my private life I already had a red hat, I already had it for twenty years. Well sixteen years. But if I'm just here shopping in Heerenveen,<sup>4</sup> by myself, I don't wear this hat or these clothes, but I nearly always have a purple coat or a purple hat on. I just like that. And then people also look at me, I also like that. Indeed, what's the fun of that? [laughing] It must be a disorder, I don't know.

Corrien, who we met in a less noticeable, "regular" outfit, told a similar story.

Corrien: Well, I'm also a member of another club, the Cul-cul club, and there we also do cultural and culinary tours. That's also a lot of fun. But when you're away with the Red Hats then you do have, constantly you get nice . . . yes just that people stop you and ask "gosh, can we have a picture taken with you," . . . or "can we take a picture," or "you look beautiful," etc. Well when I'm away with the Cul-cul then nobody notices me, for instance. And that's of course also fun, that people notice you, and a lot of people say "gosh you make me happy." So yes that's just really fun.

These quotes about the pleasures of doing something only for oneself and of being conspicuously dressed and looked at could have been taken from any of our respondents. They are the main articulations of pleasure entrenched in Red Hat activities and they have been found as separate motives in the other RHS studies as well (e.g. Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008; Stalp et al. 2009; Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 2011).

Like the study presented by Stalp, Radina, and Lynch (2008), our interviews and observations suggested in addition that these two narratives are jointly connected to the constraints in women's lives produced by the so-called ethic of care. This ethic defines women as prime caregivers, as daughters,

wives, mothers, and grandmothers who are supposed to look after others before they think of themselves. As a result, women have less free-available time to spend on leisure than men (e.g. Deem 1986; Harrington, Dawson, and Bolla 1992; Henderson and Allen 1991; Lois 2010; Shaw 1994, 2001; Wimbush and Talbot 1988), and when they do have time available they often feel guilty about taking it (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). The ethic of care keeps women homebound so that nowadays they still have a diminished claim on public space (Day 2000). This does not seem to have changed much with the victories of second wave feminism. Hochschild (1989) even argues the opposite: women still bear greater responsibility for the family and the household, but they now have to combine it with a paid position (an arrangement she has aptly described as “the second shift” 1989; see also England 2010).

In the light of the ethic of care both fun narratives about the RHS can be viewed as forms of negotiation. With their emphasis on personal fun Red Hatters claim leisure time for themselves and hence challenge the idea that they should mainly be providing care and pleasure for others. The idea that leisure can be employed as a form of resistance has meanwhile been addressed in more studies (Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, and Green 2003; Green 1998; Samdahl 1988; Shaw 1994, 2001). Engagement in publicly visible leisure is a way for older people to challenge stereotypes that define ageing as a rather painful process of physical and social deterioration (Wearing 1995). Yet, for women specifically, it can also become a way of “undoing gender.” Francine Deutsch, the scholar who coined the term, for instance notes that “when women refuse to conform to gender norms, take time for recreation despite family responsibilities . . . they undermine the stereotypical perceptions that buoy up an ideology of inequality” (Deutsch 2007, 113). In this way, the acts of Hatters resemble those Janice Radway (1984) discussed about romance readers, who too are looking for a form of self-indulgence that takes them away from ongoing family responsibilities. “The mere act of RHS members engaging in publicly visible personal leisure,” Stalp, Radina, and Lynch argue (2008, 239), “challenges gendered notions of appropriate behaviour for midlife and older women.” Red Hatters themselves also make this connection: Sanna, for instance, a thirty-eight-year-old pink Hatter with three young children, used the opposition between “pleasing others” and “pleasing the self” to explain the appeal of the RHS:

Sanna: I think that the period that I lived at home indeed, I was very concerned with pleasing others, especially my parents. So yes, then you put yourself on hold a little, then you do what they want and what they think is good, and you let this come over you. Well and then when you finally leave the house to go studying. . . . Well, then you’re really focused on yourself. Well, I didn’t find that problematic at all.

. . . But then you really are focused on yourself, then I think you're actually very selfish in everything. . . . Then I met my husband at school there. . . . And then you're doing a lot of things that are good for you and for him and for the couple. . . . And now with children, yes then you've taken it a step further, then you're not only busy with your husband, but also your children. Then again you're not working on yourself. And that's what you have with the Red Hat, so there I *am* concerned with myself. So now you compensate it a little again. I mean, at a certain point you think "sure guys, I'm not in this world to make everybody glad and happy, I'm also still here myself."

Sanna's story may be a-typical in the sense that she is much younger than most other Hatters, whose children, had they any, have already left the home. Yet, the idea that most of their lives have been about pleasing others and that it is now high time for some "me time" is shared by more women.<sup>5</sup> Martine, for instance, commented that "my environment really thinks like, you are not important yourself, others are important. This is also how I was raised, like, just act normal then you're already mad enough.<sup>6</sup> And always think of others first, and only then of yourself." Martine's speaking of a general "others"—who are more important than she is—demonstrates how the ethic of care has a much wider meaning than looking after family members. It is a discourse that positions women as responsible for the well-being of people around, whether these are siblings, parents, husbands, children, grandchildren, or an unrelated elderly person in a retirement home.

Feminist research has shown in much detail how women handle the ethic of care, in "complex combinations of compliance, resistance and co-optation" (Connell 1987, 185, cited in Schippers 2007, 87). The way our Red Hatters emphasize "me-time" expresses their desire for temporary escape, and in that sense the RHS can indeed be compared to a long tradition of women's leisure. Yet, what distinguishes the RHS is its expressive form, the spectacular public appearance aimed at drawing attention. It is this aspect that may tie the RHS to the feminism of both the suffragettes of the first wave and the "bra-burners" of the second wave. The women's movement has always exploited, exaggerated, and resisted the codes of female appearance in order to criticize mainstream gender discourse and explore new identities (e.g. Kaplan and Stowell 1995). However, while some of the Red Hatters we spoke to explicitly placed themselves in this tradition of feminism, others distanced themselves, making the RHS a paradoxical combination of feminism and femininity.

## **Feminism and Femininity**

The articulation of feminism and femininity in Red Hat practices is multilayered and contradictory as can be demonstrated by the way they experience and enjoy the Red Hat dress codes. Most notable in this respect is that both



positions find expression in the Red Hatters' choice of hat. Indeed, we soon learned that not all red hats are the same or even similar. Different chapters employ different styles. This was clearly visible during a "Fancy Red Hat Show" that took place on a Norwegian cruise (2011) that harbored almost two hundred Red Hatters and their direct family. The Hatters aboard the ship gave ample response to the call "to honour an old tradition of the HAL (Holland-Amerika Lijn), where ladies present themselves with their most beautiful or pimped hat." The group that participated in the show could directly be categorized into two types of Red Hatters: while some of them looked "Fancy" with neat, chic and pretty hats, there were others that looked "Showy," with hats decorated in the most imaginative and crazy ways possible. One woman, for instance, wore a big champagne bottle on her hat with green leaves of a plant hanging out of its mouth, while the woman who won the award of "best pimped hat" that day decorated hers with an upside down Cola cup.

These "Showy" Red Hatters often consciously reject hegemonic rules of female appearance as conveyed in the prevailing idea that women have to look beautiful and—in order to do so—be young. Like Josje, they openly ask: "of course you have to look good for yourself, but why aren't I allowed to get grey? Why aren't I allowed to get wrinkles? . . . Why do I have to have breasts that when I'm eighty, I have two of those balloons right here?" And the question it all boils down to: "Why do men become more attractive as they get older and women don't?" For Josje, conspicuousness with the Red Hats thus goes hand in hand with challenging the hegemonic beauty standard.

This, however, is not a uniform position within the RHS since, conversely, there are also Red Hatters who actually like to be admired for their beauty, and gain pleasure from celebrating rather than subverting its relation with the feminine. They praise RHS dress-up since it enables them to feel young and beautiful again and thus underline this dominant discourse on femininity (which Naomi Wolf [1991] called the "beauty myth")—that is, that you have to be beautiful in order to be feminine. This is, for instance, expressed in the club song of the Purple Roses, one of the Dutch chapters we have observed.<sup>7</sup>

*So here we are for the umpteenth time  
With the Purple Roses  
For a nice day, because pleasure is fine  
With the Purple Roses  
Dressed in purple, with a hat that is red  
Feel woman, feel young, that's where we're at  
Your hat chic and grandiose, at the tip of your nose*

*With the Purple Roses*

*Put your worries away, the prettiest, that's you*

*Everything is possible, anything goes*

*With the Purple Roses*

This verse frames the RHS as a source for women to feel feminine, by making them feel young and beautiful. The Red Hatters who value this aspect of the RHS commonly feel that dress-up should be used to make them look chic as a class-specific beauty ideal, not conspicuous. This is, at least, the position that Renee argues for. When we asked her about the importance of beauty and youth for women, she answered:

Renee: And first of all I also think you should do it for yourself. I think you owe it to yourself to look good.

Samira: Yes and why's that?

Renee: First, you're a woman and you also have to look feminine. And second you're not supposed to neglect yourself. And "when you've got it, you flaunt it."<sup>8</sup> That's what my mother would also say, sometimes, . . . you should show what you've got! And that doesn't have to be vulgar, you don't have to be conspicuous, you don't have to claim attention, to provoke, but just, if you look nice, you should show it. And not just . . . and of course you should look your best, and you should do everything to look your best, I think. But you also have to have something to tell. I shouldn't just be a silly blonde.

Renee's comment in the last two sentences illustrates how different discourses of gender can easily be combined in one narrative (you have to look feminine, but you cannot be a "dumb blonde") that entails both endorsement and criticism of traditional femininity. Renee's views also express the continuous "internal monitor" that has been so well phrased by John Berger (1972, 45–47) in his saying: "Men act, women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at."

Both the "feminist" and the "feminine" understanding of Red Hat performance are articulated through a discourse of personal fun and individual pleasure. Such fun and pleasure not only come from Red Hat apparel and public presence, but also from a range of activities they engage in that similarly evoke and connect "feminism" and "femininity." In Joyce's account of the things she has done as a Red Hatter, there are elements of independence, pushing one's limits, making fun of femininity, as well as embracing it:

Joyce: Yes, because you'll surely do things that you've wanted to do for a long time, but your partner feels nothing for. . . . And what I also think was a good thing to do, was abseiling, because I'm terrified of heights, but I'll still go abseiling. So that you step over borders, your barriers. And diving I did twice. And what I really enjoyed, what I wanted to do for years, that's synchronized swimming. We've had a great laugh with that. Once I saw it on telly and I thought "this I want to do." And I found someone, a teacher who lectured us. And our chapter song was played, we went to swim on that. And that was also . . . well I almost couldn't stop laughing. Actually we've done a lot of activities that were a lot of fun. Belly dancing. Afterwards, I also started to go to belly dancing class, that's also fun to do.

Even when Red Hatters enjoy a set of more classic feminine leisure activities that are close to women's domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, knitting, or embroidering, they simultaneously perform and resist traditional femininity because they feel they do these things because they give *them* pleasure and not because they give *others* pleasure (cf. Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010). The same goes for dressing up<sup>9</sup> and making oneself beautiful. The women do this, because *they* think it is fun. As Froukje concurs: "I feel more special because of the clothes, and also because I notice people are looking, I see they are looking and I like it. I just like that." Renee adds: "Yes I enjoy it. I do believe, I think it is one of the fun things, I really mean it. And you're allowed to be seen. Why not? We don't have to be grey mice, right? That's what I mean." Personal fun is also the main objective when Red Hatters talk about their dress-up being fun for others too. Sanna, for instance, noticed: "Other people will also start smiling, and that's a lot of fun, you become happy from that yourself."

Of course, such claims tend to evoke intense discussions about women's agency, choice, and individual pleasures under hegemonic gender relations (see, e.g., Stuart and Donaghue 2012). Authors like Harrison (1997), Hermes (1995), and Hollows (2003), however, have all shown how (pop) cultural practices allow for the performance of hegemonic femininity to be a source of pleasure and of female empowerment—especially when it comes in the exaggerated form of, for instance, balls, beauty salons, domestic goddesses, or the Red Hat Society. We suggest, therefore, that the oscillation between feminism and femininity apparent in the Red Hat Society can be understood as an expression of what we want to call *radical femininities*. The "radical" refers to an array of factors (exceptional activities, extreme appearance, shameless self-indulgence) that both endorse and challenge traditional gender relations; the plural "femininities" acknowledges that Red Hatters do this in many different ways.

## Embodying the Fantasy

In order to further understand the cultural and political meanings of radical femininities, it is important to note the specific liminal space in which they are performed. In many ways, RHS performance takes place at the level of fantasy (cf. Ang 1990; see also Hollows 2003): Red Hatters dress up in clothes they normally would not wear; they adopt a fantasy name and a fantasy role, like queen, princess, or duchess. All of these practices delineate and preserve a barrier with the real. As Ien Ang defines it (1990, 83), “the pleasure of fantasy lies in its offering the subject an opportunity to take up positions which she could not do in real life; through fantasy she can move beyond the structural constraints of everyday life and explore other situations, other identities, other lives.” One of our respondents described it as:

Joyce: It always is stepping out of daily life for a moment and making it better. Well that's the Red Hat. It's . . . Annie steps away from the typewriter, and Mientje leaves her grandchildren, who she has to watch, for a little while and Bep leaves her sick husband for a little while, and for a moment you're completely different. And Bep becomes Lady Felicia, and Mientje becomes ms Fantastica, . . . and that's just different. Then you're that. You're in your role and it's different.

In other words, Red Hatters are role-playing and this enables them to negotiate the constraints they come across in their daily lives, including those produced by the ethic of care. RHS dress-up indicates that Red Hatters actually “wear” and embody their fantasies. When we asked Joyce if she felt like another person when she is dressed in full RHS regalia, she replied “absolutely” and told the following anecdote about her dress-up practices:

Joyce: Joyce goes upstairs, changes, throws on all the frills, because I don't know if you remember what I was wearing with that Queens lunch, but I really had this super glitter suit on. I'd bought that on the market, because I saw my own clothes, and really over the top, as much over the top as possible, then I'm completely patched up and in the make-up I then put on, . . . and then I come downstairs, and then I'm thus really someone else. I'm really made up and changed. I'm just . . . you also can't speak to me with Joyce . . . I won't react to that. At that moment I'm just someone different. And I'll go out the door, and people greet me, and I also greet differently.

Joyce's self-reported personality change is symbolized by her move towards the third-person in the first sentence. Her story may be rather on the extreme side, but other Red Hatters also indicate that they actually feel, think, and act

differently in the context of the RHS. One way in which they often express this is by saying that they feel they are more assertive and daring, especially in their interactions with others. Marijke, for instance, said:

- Samira: Do you feel like another person when you dress in the Red Hat Society clothes?
- Marijke: Yes I do a little, I do a little. You dare more and well, yes normally you're not looked at so much and now you're really conspicuous. Well and then you'll also look back. And that's true. Especially when you're away with a group, then we've much bigger mouths. That's true. . . . And eh, but that's also fun. . . .
- Samira: Is it then also, when you dress like that . . . are you then more self-assured than normal? Or is it just more guts?
- Marijke: Yes, you'll sooner feel like well "to hell with it." That's not what you normally feel, because then you're also less conspicuous of course. . . .
- Samira: And is your family occasionally also present, for example your husband, when you dress up? And does he notice this?
- Marijke: Yes, yes, he's always around. You see we've a sign hanging in the hall with "My home is my castle until the Queen comes home"<sup>10</sup> right, and sometimes he'd say like "here you're not the Queen!" when I would be . . . like he says it. Once every year we [have] a new year's reception at my house and he'd be there. Somewhere in the back. And then he also sees how it goes and he also always has to grin about it.

Like Joyce, Marijke also feels she can experiment with different roles and positions that transgress the boundaries of what is considered to be proper behavior for women. However, as we can see from the comment made by her husband, Red Hatters are still not completely free to take this behavior out of the RHS context and insert it into regular life. There it would still be far too intimidating to established structures of power.

Indeed, because RHS performance takes the form of fantasy, the performance of radical femininity is turned into an unthreatening act to the public as well as to Red Hatters themselves. Fantasy and play thus offer an "unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted" (Ang 1990, 85–86). In a similar vein, Judith Butler has argued that "in theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting something quite distinct from what is real"

(Butler 1988, 527). This offers the Red Hatters the space to experiment with gender identities, roles, and relations without seriously attacking hegemonic power structures and invoking resistance from those whose beliefs may be troubled by this performance. It is as if Red Hatters in effect say: “don’t worry about us, it’s just play.”

## Discussion

The idea that membership of the RHS may be empowering to women over fifty and simultaneously may reify existing stereotypes is well recognized in the few studies about this relatively new phenomenon (e.g., Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008; Stalp et al. 2009; Yarnal 2006; Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 2011). However, thus far no study has attempted to locate this contradiction in the self-understanding of Red Hatters, and their ideas about fun. We found that this more or less divides the Dutch Red Hatters into two groups, who in different ways both “undo” and “do” gender. The first group fits most with the “undoing gender” perspective, as it claims fun in “inappropriate” activities and over the top appearances, which they frame as a form of protest against hegemonic notions of beauty and age. The second group fits most with the “doing gender” perspective, as they enjoy hyperfeminine public performances and present themselves, so to speak, as “high priests of femininity.” Ferguson (1983) used this term for the editors of women’s magazines, indicating a professional group that defined the rules of standard femininity. Although we cannot generalize the distinction between these two groups to Red Hat populations outside of the Netherlands, descriptions of the different—over the top and chic—dress styles of RHS chapters in the United States (e.g. Stalp et al. 2009) suggest that it may also have relevance there.

Both the current academic research and the self-understanding of Red Hatters remain at the level of individual understanding and say little about wider cultural or political meanings of the RHS. We therefore introduced the concept of “radical femininities” to show how the Red Hatters continuously negotiate the volatile space between feminism and femininity as wider societal discourses that position women in contradictory ways. Moreover, we showed how this negotiation was embodied in fantasy and role-play. Both of which provide a liminal space for the Red Hatters to take up and try out “alternative” and “inappropriate” subject positions they cannot perform unrestrictedly in real life.

That fantasy offers a safe environment to experiment with diverse and thorny gender discourses, identities, roles, and positions has long been recognized in cultural studies. However, these studies have mainly focussed on the imagined type of fantasy that arises from reading texts, whether written, as in

romance books (Radway 1984), or spoken and performed in film, as in TV series like *Dallas* (Ang 1985). Fantasy is here depicted as a particularly silent and individual practice that takes place only between the reader and her text. In Janice Radway's "*Reading the Romance*" her main informant, Dot, explains "that when she reads her body is in the room but she herself is not" (1984, 90). On a similar note, Ien Ang argued that "fantasies, and the act of fantasizing, are usually a private practice in which we can engage at any time and the content of which we generally keep to ourselves" (Ang 1990, 84). What this tells us is that women's fantasies negotiating established gender relations have broadly four characteristics: they are imagined, private, enjoyed in solitude, and in the context of ordinary life.

However, the type of fantasy Red Hatters engage in breaks with all of these features. This is because their fantasy results from their own *physical* performance. There is no split between body and mind here; Red Hatters "play" their fantasy or ergo: they temporarily "become" their fantasy. Red Hatters thus move fantasy from the *imagined* to the *embodied*. At the same time, they also move it from the *private* to the *public* since an important part of RHS fantasy is its display before a general and admiring audience. Their fantasy is neither enjoyed in silence nor in solitude. Red Hatters play out and enjoy their fantasy together, in a group of like-minded women. Fantasy then also transfers from a *solitary* into a *social* practice. The latter always requires more planning and thus it also shifts from the *ordinary* to the *extraordinary* life. For Red Hatters, the act of fantasizing is no longer a practice one can pick up and put down at any possible time in everyday life. Instead it is a preplanned exercise one can only engage in at specific times, that is, in the case of a Red Hat event.

Whether these transgressions also mean that Hatters' embodied fantasy is more effective in empowering women and changing existing gender arrangements remains to be seen, however. On the one hand, the very public and social nature of this fantasy in action means that it is much more effective in reaching, and thus potentially influencing, large groups of people. Red Hatters can hence be said to gain more empowerment from their practices than their romance reading contemporaries. Yet, on the other hand, the actual message conveyed here is still packaged as play—as that which should not be taken *that* seriously, which ensures that the bee's sting is robbed of its venom and does not really hurt.

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## Notes

1. The interviews themselves are also treated as ethnographic material, especially since some respondents have met us for an interview in full Red Hat regalia.
2. The Dutch text is: "Er is geen doelstelling, geen politiek, geen religie, of wat dan ook. Het gaat om plezier en vriendschap na je vijftigste."
3. The original Dutch word that Janna used is "gezellig," a notoriously untranslatable term that indicates an experience of friendship, fun, homeliness, togetherness, but also uncomplicated or easy, as later in this quote.
4. A small to medium-size city in the north of the Netherlands.
5. The phrase "it's me time" literally appears on the RHS' US-national website: <http://www.redhatsociety.com/aboutus/ItsMeTime.html>.
6. This is a typical Dutch expression that defines "normalcy" as modesty and not standing out: "doe maar gewoon, dan doe je gek genoeg."
7. Our translation from Dutch.
8. Here Renee uses the actual English expression: "when you've got it, you flaunt it."
9. In this case "dress-up" is used as a translation of the Dutch word "optutten."
10. Marijke uses the English phrase "My home is my castle until the Queen comes home."

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## Author Biographies

**Samira van Bohemen** is a PhD Candidate at Erasmus University Rotterdam and a member of the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS). Her research interests are broad and cover the fields of gender and popular culture and the sociology of politics and religion.

**Liesbet van Zoonen** is Professor of Media and Communication at Loughborough University, and Professor of Popular Culture at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her current research is about pubtaboos and desires around identity management.

**Stef Aupers** is Associate Professor at the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His principal research interest is cultural change in western societies, and he has published on religious change and spirituality, online computer games and play culture, internet culture and conspiracy culture.